

A Tribute to Diane Shaver Clemens

by John O'Grady

Mentor, advisor, advocate, friend: Diane Shaver Clemens was this and much more to me for the 37 years – a lifetime, really – during which I had the great fortune to know her. As an academic and activist, she embodied freedom of thought, speech and action in her everyday life. The critical thinking skills she imparted to me (and her other grateful students) formed my worldview during the most formative time in my life, and I still set my moral compass by them today.

I met Diane in 1979, when at 19 years old I arrived alone and friendless at the University of California, Berkeley. Drawn by the school's reputation as a bastion of free speech, I'd hitchhiked there from New Jersey, where I grew up the proverbial all-American boy. In high school, I was an ROTC cadet at a private Catholic boy's institution because that's who my father insisted I be. But I had zero confidence in the institutions I grew up with – my parents, school, church and government. I also rejected the rabid hatred of so-called "Communists" that seemed to infect everyone around me. So I decided to move west as soon as I could.

Soon after enrolling as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, I was in one of Diane's classes and got hooked on critical thinking in American history. She took me under her wing and was totally supportive of everything I wanted to do. She was my lead cheerleader, and I took as many of her courses as I could. In fact, she singlehandedly made it possible for me to get the education I wanted by treating me like a graduate student even though I was an undergrad.

Diane's office in Dwinelle Hall was a buzzing hub of graduate students where she cultivated an intellectually invigorating atmosphere. Here, we energetically debated and discussed vital issues of American history in a spirit of camaraderie. Diane, completely unconcerned that I was an "underclassman," warmly invited me into that vibrant scholastic subculture. It was a radical experience to have a member of the previous generation so freely share with me her social circle, as well as all she'd learned through rigorous study and hard-won struggle.

When I decided to study CIA propaganda about Soviet military spending, she got 100% behind me and supervised my research. Other professors refused to help because they said this was more suited to the work of a graduate student – but not Diane. Not only that: she went well above and beyond the call of duty to help me complete that challenging research. For example, when I requested documents under the Freedom of Information

Act, the Central Intelligence Agency tried to charge me a \$20,000 deposit for photocopying costs, even though it could only legally do so if releasing the documents would be not be in the public interest. When I couldn't find a lawyer to take my case, Diane encouraged me to write my honors thesis on CIA violations of the Freedom of Information Act. That paper was published by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. That wouldn't have been remotely possible without Diane's dedication to my studies.

In the summer of 1980, I took a two-month cross-country bicycle ride to pursue my research in Washington, D.C. while Diane was teaching a summer class in Colorado. When I stopped in to visit for a few days, Diane asked me, an undergraduate, to give her students a lecture on the subject of CIA propaganda. I was incredibly grateful that she showed me such respect. The fact that she placed so much trust in me bolstered my self-confidence tremendously.

Diane also supported my more radical tendencies because she was a fellow activist who spent her entire adult life standing up for important causes, from civil rights to ending the Vietnam War and more. Inspired by her example, in 1979 I led a sit-in at the UC Berkeley ROTC building with about 50 cadets to protest the American bombing of the Iranian embassy. The chancellor wanted to have me arrested, but Diane intervened to make sure I wasn't. When the university later threatened to eliminate Diane's position as Faculty Assistant to the Chancellor on the Status of Women under Title IX, I organized a petition to save her job – and I'm proud to say it worked.

I don't spend much time railing against "the system" anymore: I simply try to do what I can pragmatically as a lawyer. But Diane's example continues to inspire my life and career as an attorney and mediator. One of the most important lessons I learned from her is that real patriotism is not about blindly saluting the flag: it's about speaking out and standing up for the freedom and system of participatory government for which those stars and stripes stand. She taught me that patriots question those in authority and hold them accountable. That's how we, as a country, move closer to fulfilling the American Experiment's infinite potential for justice. Diane embodied this ideal. In that way, she was the truest patriot I've ever personally known.

But even more than Diane's political camaraderie, I will miss her friendship. Most though, I will her unconditional love. At Diane's invitation, I spent holidays at the Clemens home, I house-sat for them, and once played an important role in putting a new roof on her house. That now seems symbolic to me, since Diane was such a source of shelter and comfort during my years at Berkeley and well beyond, as we stayed in touch over the years.

Diane touched so many lives in so many ways. As a professor, she taught generations of historians at Berkeley, passing on her wisdom and inspiring students not just to study history, but to make it. As an activist, she stood tall and spoke powerfully in support of what she believed was right. As a friend, she made people think critically, feel deeply and laugh loudly. As a wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, Diane loved fully and was fully loved in turn.

Her absence hurts my heart and strains my soul, as the vanishing of Diane's singular spirit leaves a vast emotional vacuum in my life. But the pain of loss is a small price to pay for the ecstatic joy of knowing her. So, I now shed tears in her memory. Tomorrow, I start carrying on, day by day: honoring Diane's life by striving to live as passionately and purposefully as she did. That is something I am sure would make her happy.